



Adobe Flash Player is no longer supported

Eleven Stars Over Andalusia

Mahmoud Darwish

I On our last evening on this land

On our last evening on this land we chop our days
 from our young trees, count the ribs we'll take with us
 and the ribs we'll leave behind... On the last evening
 we bid nothing farewell, nor find the time to end...
 Everything remains as it is, it is the place that changes our dreams
 and its visitors. Suddenly we're incapable of irony,
 this land will now host atoms of dust... Here, on our last evening,
 we look closely at the mountains besieging the clouds: a conquest...
 and a counter-conquest,
 and an old time handing this new time the keys to our doors.
 So enter our houses, conquerors, and drink the wine
 of our mellifluous *Mouwashah*.* We are the night at midnight,
 and no horseman will bring dawn from the sanctuary of the last Call to
 Prayer...
 Our tea is green and hot; drink it. Our pistachios are fresh; eat them.
 The beds are of green cedar, fall on them,
 following this long siege, lie down on the feathers of
 our dreams. The sheets are crisp, perfumes are ready by the door, and there are
 plenty of mirrors:
 enter them so we may exit completely. Soon we will search
 in the margins of your history, in distant countries,
 for what was once our history. And in the end we will ask ourselves:
 Was Andalusia here or there? On the land...or in the poem?

* The characteristic form of Andalusian poetry, recited and sung. Still performed through-out the Arab world.

II How can I write above the clouds?

How can I write my people's testament above the clouds when they
 abandon time as they do their coats at home, my people
 who raze each fortress they build and pitch on its ruins
 a tent, nostalgic for the beginning of palm trees? My people betray my people
 in wars over salt. But Granada is made of gold,
 of silken words woven with almonds, of silver tears
 in the string of a lute. Granada is a law unto herself:
 it befits her to be whatever she wants to be: nostalgia for
 anything long past or which will pass. A swallow's wing brushes
 a woman's breast, and she screams: "Granada is my body."
 In the meadow someone loses a gazelle, and he screams, "Granada is my
 country."
 And I come from there... So sing until from my ribs the goldfinches can build
 a staircase to the nearer sky. Sing of the chivalry of those who ascend,
 moon by moon, to their death in the Beloved's alley. Sing the birds of the garden,
 stone by stone. How I love you, who have broken me,
 string by string, on the road to her heated night. Sing how,
 after you, the smell of coffee has no morning. Sing of my departure,

from the cooing of doves on your knees and from my soul nesting
in the mellifluous letters of your name. Granada is for singing, so sing!

III There is a sky beyond the sky for me

There is a sky beyond the sky for my return, but
I am still burnishing the metal of this place, living in
an hour that foresees the unseen. I know that time
cannot twice be on my side, and I know that I will leave—
I'll emerge, with wings, from the banner I am, bird
that never alights on trees in the garden—
I will shed my skin and my language.
Some of my words of love will fall into
Lorca's poems; he'll live in my bedroom
and see what I have seen of the Bedouin moon. I'll emerge
from almond trees like cotton on sea foam. The stranger passed,
carrying seven hundred years of horses. The stranger passed
here to let the stranger pass there. In a while I'll emerge a stranger
from the wrinkles of my time, alien to Syria and to Andalusia.
This land is not my sky, yet this evening is mine.
The keys are mine, the minarets are mine, the lamps are mine,
and I am also mine. I am Adam of the two Edens, I who lost paradise twice.
So expel me slowly,
and kill me slowly,
under my olive tree,
along with Lorca...

IV I am one of the kings of the end

... And I am one of the kings of the end... I jump
off my horse in the last winter. I am the last gasp of an Arab.
I do not look for myrtle over the roofs of houses, nor do I
look around: no one should know me, no one should recognize me, no one who
knew me
when I polished marble words to let my woman step
barefoot over dappled light. I do not look into the night, I mustn't
see a moon that once lit up all the secrets of Granada,
body by body. I do not look into the shadow, so as not to see
somebody carrying my name and running after me: take your name away from
me
and give me the silver of the white poplar. I do not look behind me, so I won't
remember
I've passed over this land, there is no land in this land
since time broke around me shard by shard.
I was not a lover believing that water is a mirror,
as I told my old friends, and no love can redeem me,
for I've accepted the "peace accord" and there is no longer a present left
to let me pass, tomorrow, close to yesterday. Castile will raise
its crown above God's minaret. I hear the rattling of keys
in the door of our golden history. Farewell to our history! Will I be
the one to close the last door of the sky, I, the last gasp of an Arab?

V One day I will sit on the pavement

One day I will sit on the pavement...the pavement of the estranged.
I was no Narcissus; still I defend my image
in the mirrors. Haven't you been here once before, stranger?
Five hundred years have passed, but our breakup wasn't final,
and the messages between us never stopped. The wars
did not change the gardens of my Granada. One day I'll pass its moons
and brush my desire against a lemon tree... Embrace me and let me be reborn
from the scents of sun and river on your shoulders, from your feet

that scratch the evening until it weeps milk to accompany the poem's night...
 I was not a passerby in the words of singers... I was the words
 of the singers, the reconciliation of Athens and Persia, an East embracing a West
 embarked on one essence. Embrace me that I may be born again
 from Damascene swords hanging in shops. Nothing remains of me
 but my old shield and my horse's gilded saddle. Nothing remains of me
 but manuscripts of Averroes, *The Collar of the Dove*, * and translations...
 On the pavement, in the Square of the Daisy,
 I was counting the doves: one, two, thirty...and the girls
 snatching the shadows of the young trees over the marble, leaving me
 leaves yellow with age. Autumn passed me by, and I did not notice
 the entire season had passed. Our history passed me on the pavement...
 and I did not notice.

* A celebrated treatise on love by Ibn Hazm of Cordoba.

VI *Truth has two faces and the snow is black*

Truth has two faces and the snow falls black on our city.
 We can feel no despair beyond our despair,
 and the end—firm in its step—marches to the wall,
 marching on tiles that are wet with our tears.
 Who will bring down our flags: we or they? And who
 will recite the “peace accord,” O king of dying?
 Everything’s prepared for us in advance; who will tear our names
 from our identity: you or they? And who will instill in us
 the speech of wanderings: “We were unable to break the siege;
 let us then hand the keys to our paradise to the Minister of Peace, and be
 saved...”
 Truth has two faces. To us the holy emblem was a sword
 hanging over us. So what did you do to our fortress before this day?
 You didn’t fight, afraid of martyrdom. Your throne is your coffin.
 Carry then the coffin to save the throne, O king of waiting,
 this exodus will leave us only a handful of dust...
 Who will bury our days after us: you...or they? And who
 will raise their banners over our walls: you...or
 a desperate knight? Who will hang their bells on our journey:
 you...or a miserable guard? Everything is fixed for us;
 why, then, this unending conclusion, O king of dying?

VII *Who am I after the night of the estranged ?*

Who am I after the night of the estranged? I wake from my dream,
 frightened of the obscure daylight on the marble of the house, of
 the sun’s darkness in the roses, of the water of my fountain;
 frightened of milk on the lip of the fig, of my language;
 frightened of wind that—frightened—combs a willow; frightened
 of the clarity of petrified time, of a present no longer
 a present; frightened, passing a world that is no longer
 my world. Despair, be merciful. Death, be
 a blessing on the stranger who sees the unseen more clearly than
 a reality that is no longer real. I’ll fall from a star
 in the sky into a tent on the road to...where?
 Where is the road to anything? I see the unseen more clearly than
 a street that is no longer my street. Who am I after the night of the estranged?
 Through others I once walked toward myself, and here I am,
 losing that self, those others. My horse disappeared by the Atlantic,
 and by the Mediterranean I bleed, stabbed with a spear.
 Who am I after the night of the estranged? I cannot return to
 my brothers under the palm tree of my old house, and I cannot descend to

the bottom of my abyss. You, the unseen! Love has no heart...
no heart in which I can dwell after the night of the estranged...

VIII O water, be a string to my guitar

O water, be a string to my guitar. The conquerors arrived,
and the old conquerors left. It is difficult to remember my face
in the mirrors. Water, be my memory, let me see what I have lost.
Who am I after this exodus? I have a rock
with my name on it, on a hill from which I see what's long gone...
Seven hundred years escort me beyond the city wall...
In vain time turns to let me salvage my past from a moment
that gives birth to my exile...and others' ...
To my guitar, O water, be a string. The conquerors arrived,
and the old conquerors left, heading southward, repairing their days
in the trashheap of change: I know who I was yesterday, but who will I be
in a tomorrow under Columbus's Atlantic banners? Be a string,
be a string to my guitar, O water! There is no *Misr** in Egypt,
no Fez in Fez**, and Syria draws away. There is no falcon in
my people's banner, no river east of the palm groves besieged
by the Mongols' fast horses. In which Andalusia do I end? Here
or there? I will know I've perished and that here I've left
the best part of me: my past. Nothing remains but my guitar.
Then be to my guitar a string, O water. The old conquerors left,
the new conquerors arrived.

* Misr = "urban life," but also "Egypt."

** Fez (Arabic Fas) also means "ax"

IX In the exodus I love you more

In the exodus I love you more. In a while
you will lock the city's gates. There is no heart for me in your hands, and no
road anywhere for my journey. In this demise I love you more.
After your breast, there is no milk for the pomegranate at our window.
Palm trees have become weightless,
the hills have become weightless, and streets in the dusk have become
weightless;
the earth has become weightless as it bids farewell to its dust. Words have
become weightless,
and stories have become weightless on the staircase of night. My heart alone is
heavy,
so let it remain here, around your house,
barking, howling for a golden time.
It alone is my homeland. In the exodus I love you more,
I empty my soul of words: I love you more.
We depart. Butterflies lead our shadows. In exodus
we remember the lost buttons of our shirts, we forget
the crown of our days, we remember the apricot's sweat, we forget
the dance of horses on festival nights. In departure
we become only the birds' equals, merciful to our days, grateful for the least.
I am content to have the golden dagger that makes my murdered heart dance—
kill me then, slowly, so I may say: I love you more than
I had said before the exodus. I love you. Nothing hurts me,
neither air nor water...neither basil in your morning nor
iris in your evening, nothing hurts me after this departure.

X I want from love only the beginning

I want from love only the beginning. Doves patch,
over the squares of my Granada, this day's shirt.

There is wine in our clay jars for the feast after us.
In the songs there are windows: enough for blossoms to explode.

I leave jasmine in the vase; I leave my young heart
in my mother's cupboard; I leave my dream, laughing, in water;
I leave the dawn in the honey of the figs; I leave my day and my yesterday
in the passage to the Square of the Orange where doves fly.

Did I really descend to your feet so speech could rise,
a white moon in the milk of your nights...pound the air
so I could see the Street of the Flute blue...pound the evening
so I could see how this marble between us suffers?

The windows are empty of the orchards of your shawl. In another time
I knew so much about you. I picked gardenias
from your ten fingers. In another time there were pearls for me
around your neck, and a name on a ring whose gem was darkness, shining.

I want from love only the beginning. Doves flew
in the last sky, they flew and flew in that sky.
There is still wine, after us, in the barrels and jars.
A little land will suffice for us to meet, a little land will be enough for peace.

XI *Violins*

Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia
Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia

Violins weep for a time that does not return
Violins weep for a homeland that might return

Violins set fire to the woods of that deep deep darkness
Violins tear the horizon and smell my blood in the vein

Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia
Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia

Violins are horses on a phantom string of moaning water
Violins are the ebb and flow of a field of wild lilacs

Violins are monsters touched by the nail of a woman now distant
Violins are an army, building and filling a tomb made of marble and
*Nahawund**

Violins are the anarchy of hearts driven mad by the wind in a dancer's foot
Violins are flocks of birds fleeing a torn banner

Violins are complaints of silk creased in the lover's night
Violins are the distant sound of wine falling on a previous desire

Violins follow me everywhere in vengeance
Violins seek me out to kill me wherever they find me

Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia
Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia

* One of the classical Arabic musical modes.

Translated by Mona Anis and Nigel Ryan, with Aga Shahid Ali and Ahmad Dallal

Edward W. Said On Mahmoud Darwish

Mahmoud Darwish was born in 1942 in the Palestinian village of Birweh, which the Israelis destroyed six years later. While working as an editor and translator for the Rakah (Communist) Party newspaper, he was imprisoned several times and frequently harassed by Israeli authorities. By the early 1970s, when he arrived in Beirut, his reputation as a brilliant poet—certainly the most gifted of his generation in the Arab world—was already established. He quickly became affiliated with the P.L.O. and soon became Palestine's unofficial national poet. Yet at the same time he remained in close touch with Israeli society and culture and was one of the very few Arabs to know and appreciate such great Israeli poets as Bialik.

After 1982, Darwish became a wandering exile, living in Arab capitals like Cairo and Tunis before settling in Paris, where he still lives. A man of truly remarkable intelligence, he played (always reluctantly) an important political role in the P.L.O. For at least a decade he was very close to Yasir Arafat, first as an adviser and then, from about 1978 on, as a member of the P.L.O. Executive Committee. He never belonged to any political party; his mordant wit, fierce political independence, and exceptionally refined cultural sensibility kept him at a distance from the frequent coarse-ness of Palestinian and Arab politics. Yet his immense prestige as a poet made him politically invaluable, and his intimate knowledge of Israeli life and society was also useful to the P.L.O. leadership.

But his uneasiness with organized politics never left him and indeed intensified in the late '80s. He would often watch as the deftly eloquent speeches he wrote for Arafat were rendered deliberately obfuscatory and turgid by organization men and by Arafat himself. His vision of politics was at the same time tragic and Swiftian, and it was not surprising that he resigned from the P.L.O.'s Executive Committee to protest the signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles with Israel in the fall of 1993. His extremely harsh remarks to Arafat and the others were leaked to the press and published throughout Israel and the Arab world: "You are dead," he effectively told them. On another occasion Arafat complained that the Palestinians were "an ungrateful people." "Find yourself another people then," Dar-wish angrily responded.

I first met Darwish in 1974, and we have remained close friends ever since. He edits *Karmel*, a quarterly literary and intellectual journal published in Cyprus in which several of my own essays have appeared. But we meet infrequently and communicate mostly by phone. Darwish reads English and French but is really fluent in neither, although he has lived in France for almost a decade. His emotional and aesthetic milieu remains Arab and to a lesser extent (for obvious reasons) Israeli. Despite his irony and the fact that he lives in neither Palestine nor Israel, he is a commanding presence in the lives of both nations. He has a huge audience throughout the Arab world (by 1977 his books had already sold over a million copies), not only among Palestinians, although he is very far from being a populist. And because of his long association with the P.L.O. Executive Committee he is read and paid attention to in Israel. A few years ago one of his poems expressing a harsh, exasperated view of Israel was debated in the Knesset, so powerfully did his tones address his other public. No other Palestinian literary figure—not even the novelist Emil Habiby, who won the Israel Prize in 1992, and whom Darwish denounced for taking it—has anything like this effect.

In Darwish, the personal and the public are always in an uneasy relationship, the force and passion of the former ill-suited to the tests of political correctness and policy required by the latter. But careful writer and craftsmen that he is, Darwish is also very much a performing poet of a type with few equivalents in the West. He has a fiery and yet also strangely intimate style that is designed for the immediate response of a live audience. Only a few Western poets—Yeats,

Walcott, Ginsberg—possess that irresistibly rare combination of incantatory public style with deep and often hermetic personal sentiments. Like them, Darwish is also a wonderful technician, using the incomparably rich Arabic prosodic tradition in innovative, constantly new ways. This allows him something quite rare in modern Arabic poetry: great stylistic virtuosity combined with a chiseled and finally simple (because so refined) sense of poetic statement.

The present ode or *qasida*, “Eleven Stars Over Andalusia,” was written and published in 1992. It emerged out of three disparate occasions: the quincentennial commemorations of 1492, Darwish’s first trip to Spain, and the P.L.O.’s decision to enter the U.S.- and Russian-sponsored peace process that had begun with the Madrid Conference of October 1991. The poem was originally published in *Al Quds*, a Palestinian daily edited in London. The poem’s melancholy, disaffected tone was instantly read as an allegory and critique of Arafat’s political exhaustion: “Why then prolong this unending conclusion, King of the last moments before death?” Indeed, the verses have a tone of dispirited lassitude and defeated fatalism that for many Palestinians captured the extraordinary downward spiral of Palestine’s fortunes, which like Andalusia’s went from a grand cultural apex to a terrible nadir of dispossession, both in actuality and metaphorically.

But that explains only one aspect of the poem. Its title in Arabic is simply “Eleven Stars”; I have added the explanatory “Over Andalusia” to make explicit the poem’s contemporary setting. The “eleven stars,” however, are quoted directly from the Sura of Joseph in the Koran: “So Joseph told his father, ‘My father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and moon; I saw them bowing down before me.’” His father warns him not to say any of this to his brothers, since they may do him harm because of his gifts as a seer; Joseph is then informed that the Lord has chosen him to interpret events, which of course means that he has been endowed with the divine power of prophecy. Thus the narrator of Darwish’s *qasida* assumes both the privileges and the dangers of seeing what others cannot, in this case the meaning of Andalusia’s fall for today’s Palestinians, especially their leaders. Quite startlingly, Darwish in effect prophesies the events of a year later (September 1993), when Israel and the P.L.O. signed their “historical breakthrough” document.

But what gives the poem its artistic coherence is not so much its topicality as the way it extends the most recent phase of Darwish’s poetry into new situations and imagery, a great deal of which is caught by this excellent translation. Since Darwish left Beirut in 1982, one of the main topoi in his verse is not just the place and time of ending (for which the various Palestinian exodes are an all too persistent reference) but what happens after the ending, what it is like to live past one’s time and place, how survival after the aftermath becomes an esoteric and certainly an exotic situation for the poet and his people. “The earth is closing on us, pushing us through the last passage,” he wrote in 1984:

*We saw the faces of these who'll throw our children
Out of the windows of this last space: Our star will hang up mirrors.
Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after
the last sky?*

In “Eleven Stars Over Andalusia,” earth and enemies no longer force the issue and squeeze the people past the end. It is now “ourselves” and fate, represented by the fall of Granada in 1492, that are responsible. And poetry now replaces history as the site of actuality, very much as in Wallace Stevens’s “Of Mere Being”:

*The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance
A gold-feathered bird*

Yet Darwish's withdrawal in this ode is unlike that of Stevens in these lines or of Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium." Poetry for Darwish provides not simply an access of unusual insight or a distant realm of fashioned order but a harassing amalgam of poetry and collective memory, each pressing on the other. And the paradox deepens almost unbearably as the privacy of a dream is encroached on and even reproduced by a sinister, threatening reality, as in section XI of this poem, where the repetition of "violins" collapses the anxious dialectic without resolving or transcending it. This strained and de-liberately unresolved quality in Darwish's recent poetry makes it an instance of what Adorno called *late style*, in which the conventional and the ethereal, the historical and the transcendently aesthetic combine to provide an astonishingly concrete sense of going beyond what anyone has ever lived through in reality.